GENERAL

5 Coptic Myths about Islam

BY MR. BILAL MUHAMMAD ON FEBRUARY 29, 2020 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)



You are having a beautiful stroll through the park, when suddenly, you recognize your colleague from school — Andrew Boutros. "Isn't the weather lovely today," you remark, to which he replies, "Islam is a cult, the Quran is violent, and Muhammad was a warlord."

This is a very familiar conversation that many of us have had with our Coptic Christian friends. It seems that we can hardly have a conversation without snide remarks about our religion (often off-topic) being made. The comments pierce our hearts, as there is nothing that we love more than Allah and His Messenger. We patiently listen to their vitriol and their stories of persecution.

And, no doubt, many Coptic Christians have been victims of discrimination and even terrorism. That must first be acknowledged and accounted for. But history is often more nuanced than the claims of sensationalists, as the collective mythos of a community can cause one to become out-of-touch with reality. This article will highlight some of the most popular accusations leveled by Copts against Muslims.

1. Muslims burned down the Library of Alexandria. Or did they?

Nothing is more frightening than scores of barbarian Arabs, frothing at the mouth, burning down a centre of education and civilization. But this did not happen. The earliest recorded document accusing Muslims of burning down the library is Bar Hebraeus' *Historia Compendiosa Dynastiarum*. It claims that 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb ordered the books to be destroyed; and that they were used as a source of heat for Islamic bathhouses.

The document only dates back to the 13th century — nearly 600 years after the event described. However, the libraries were in fact destroyed gradually between the 1st century BCE and 4th centuries CE — long before the Prophet Muhammad (s). Julius Caesar set fire to Alexandria's docks in 48 BCE, destroying 40,000 scrolls from the library. In 272 CE, Emperor Aurelian destroyed the quarter of Alexandria where the supposed remnants of the library would have been. Emperor Diocletian's siege of Alexandria in 297 CE caused further damage to the city.

A new library, the Serapeum, was established in the fourth century CE by Egyptian pagans. Ironically, the Coptic Christians actually demolished the Serapeum in 391 CE.

Is it possible that Bar Hebraeus' source, although late, still contains a kernel of truth? One of the main characters in the account is Yahya an-Nahwi, also known as John the Grammarian (Philioponus). But John the Grammarian died in ~570 CE, and thus could not have witnessed the Muslim conquest.

To quote Roy MacLeod, author of *Introduction: Alexandria in History and Myth*, "both of the Alexandrian libraries were destroyed by the end of the fourth century, and there is no mention of any library surviving at Alexandria in the Christian literature of the centuries following that date." (p. 71)



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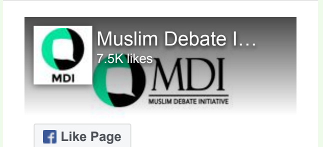
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In the early 7th century, the Coptic Church was under the domination of the Byzantine Empire. They had exiled Pope Benjamin I into the desert, and installed their own tyrannical patriarch, Cyrus of Alexandria. It was the Muslim conquerors that kicked the Byzantines out of Egypt and reinstalled Pope Benjamin I. The tenth century Coptic chronicle, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, confirms that 'Amr b. al-'Ās welcomed the Coptic Pope back into Alexandria, and fulfilled all of his requests. The same text says that the Muslims "kept their hands off the province and its inhabitants" and allowed Benjamin I to govern and administer the affairs of his people.

As a side note, the same section says that the Prophet Muhammad (s) "brought back the worshippers of idols to the knowledge of the One God … And the Lord abandoned the army of the Romans before him, as a punishment for their corrupt faith, and because of the anathemas uttered against them, on account of the council of Chalcedon."

This isn't the only Christian text from this period that describes the Prophet and the conquests in a favourable way. In 661 CE, Sebeos, the Armenian Bishop, wrote, "… a man from the sons of Ishmael named Mahmed became prominent … Mahmed taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially since he was informed and knowledgeable about Mosaic history. Because the command had come from on High, he ordered them all to assemble together and to unite in faith. Abandoning the reverence of vain things, they turned toward the living God, who had appeared to their father Abraham."

John bar Penkaye, a Syriac writer from the Church of the East, wrote in the late 600s: "We should not think of the advent (of the children of Hagar) as something ordinary, but as due to divine working. Before calling them, (God) had prepared them beforehand to hold Christians in honour, thus they also had a special commandment from God concerning our monastic station, that they should hold it in honour. Now when these people came, at God's command, and took over as it were both kingdoms, not with any war or battle, but in a menial fashion, such as when a brand is rescued out of the fire; not using weapons of war or human means. God put victory into their hands in such a way that the words written concerning them might be fulfilled, namely, 'One man chased a thousand and two men routed ten thousand'! How, otherwise, could naked men, riding without armour or shield, have been able to win, apart from divine aid, God having called them from the ends of the earth so as to destroy, by them, a sinful kingdom, and to bring low, through them. the proud spirit of the Persians."

3. Muslims forced the Arabic language onto the Copts … well, not really.

Who needs a throaty language when you could've been talking in cool hieroglyphs or something?

Coptic Christian Egyptians, who usually speak Arabic and have Arabic names or surnames, are usually quick to clarify that they are not Arabs. But the Arabs today, for all intents and purposes, are more of a language group than strictly a "race". Whilst the average "Arab" may have some Babylonian, Syriac, Phoenician, Assyrian, Chaldean, Greco-Roman, Jewish, Kurdish, Turkish, Berber, and Coptic blood, Egypt is unanimously and proudly an Arab country. Outside of Church formalities, it is the only language spoken in the country.

But it was the Muslims that forced Arabic onto Egypt, right? Wrong. In the early 2nd century CE, the Sinai was part of the Roman province "Arabia Petraea" or simply "Arabia." It was known to inhabit Arabic-speaking tribes. According to page 9 of *The History of Herodotus* by George Rawlinson, Arabic was spoken in Egypt's Eastern Desert prior to Islam. Arabic-Coptic bilingualism lasted a number of centuries in Egypt.

In the 12th century CE, Pope Gabriel II of Alexandria made Arabic a liturgical language of the Coptic Church.

4. Were Copts forced to become Muslim?

Despite the Muslim conquest in the 7th century, Egypt retained a Coptic majority until the 11th century. Other sources say that the Copts converted en masse in the 14th century.

Conversions occurred for many reasons, from personal conviction to socio-economic and cultural pressures. No doubt, there were periods of violence and humiliation. Any Muslim that oppressed a Christian of his or her rights is to be rightfully condemned. God will judge them, and He may choose to punish them for their sin. But the perpetual existence and material success of the Coptic population (among other ancient non-Muslim communities in the Muslim world) is a testament to a general policy of tolerance. The same, however, cannot be said about the Muslims of Iberia, Sicily, and elsewhere in this period, who were all force-converted, exiled, or murdered by the Church without exception.

There were even cases where Coptic Christians preferred Muslim courts over Coptic courts (which still existed and operated under Muslim rule).

5. *Jizya* taxes were really really high though, right? Actually, they were probably lower than your taxes.

Jizya is often cited as the main source of oppression of Coptic Christians. Yes, no one likes to pay taxes, just ask a redneck. And yes, Muslims paid fewer taxes to encourage conversion. But the *jizya* was often seen as a replacement for military service. According to a study published in 2018 by the Cambridge University Press, the poll-tax was only one *dinar* from 641-750 CE, between one and four *dinars* from 750 CE and 1100 CE. From 641 to 1517 CE, the average tax rate for Coptic Christians was only 1.4% to 10%.

Conversations on Coptic conversion to Islam often neglect the possibility that some Copts were simply and organically convinced of Islam's veracity; or at least not strongly convinced by Christianity's claims.

It is reported that the Prophet Muhammad (s) said, **"Whoever hurts a *dhimmi*** (non-Muslim minority), **I am his adversary, and I shall be an adversary to him on the Day of Resurrection."**

As we can see, much of what is said on this topic is either half-true or totally false. Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt have in fact worsened under post-colonial secular nationalist Egypt, with sporadic acts of terror on one side and the support of militant secular dictators on the other. But an honest study of history is required for us to heal our wounds and learn from the past.

It is reported in Matthew 5:44 that Jesus said, "love your enemies". I don't consider the Christians to be my enemies, but rather as my fellows in the Abrahamic family. This is a time where atheism is on the rise and monotheistic religions in particular are under threat. This is a time of postmodern nihilism, the destruction of the family, the dissolution of sacred manhood and womanhood, and all forms of perversity and profanity. In this time, it is my hope that people of faith can come together on common issues, rather than be divided on pettiness.

We are committed to the truth, and we invite everyone to shed their nationalism and victim complexes, and commit themselves to the Creator. We belong to God, and to Him will we return.

So, let's stroll through the park on beautiful days together, without making false accusations against one another — with God's permission.

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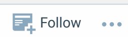

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